Weekend

Exclusive
Joe Sacco's graphic dispatch from Iraq

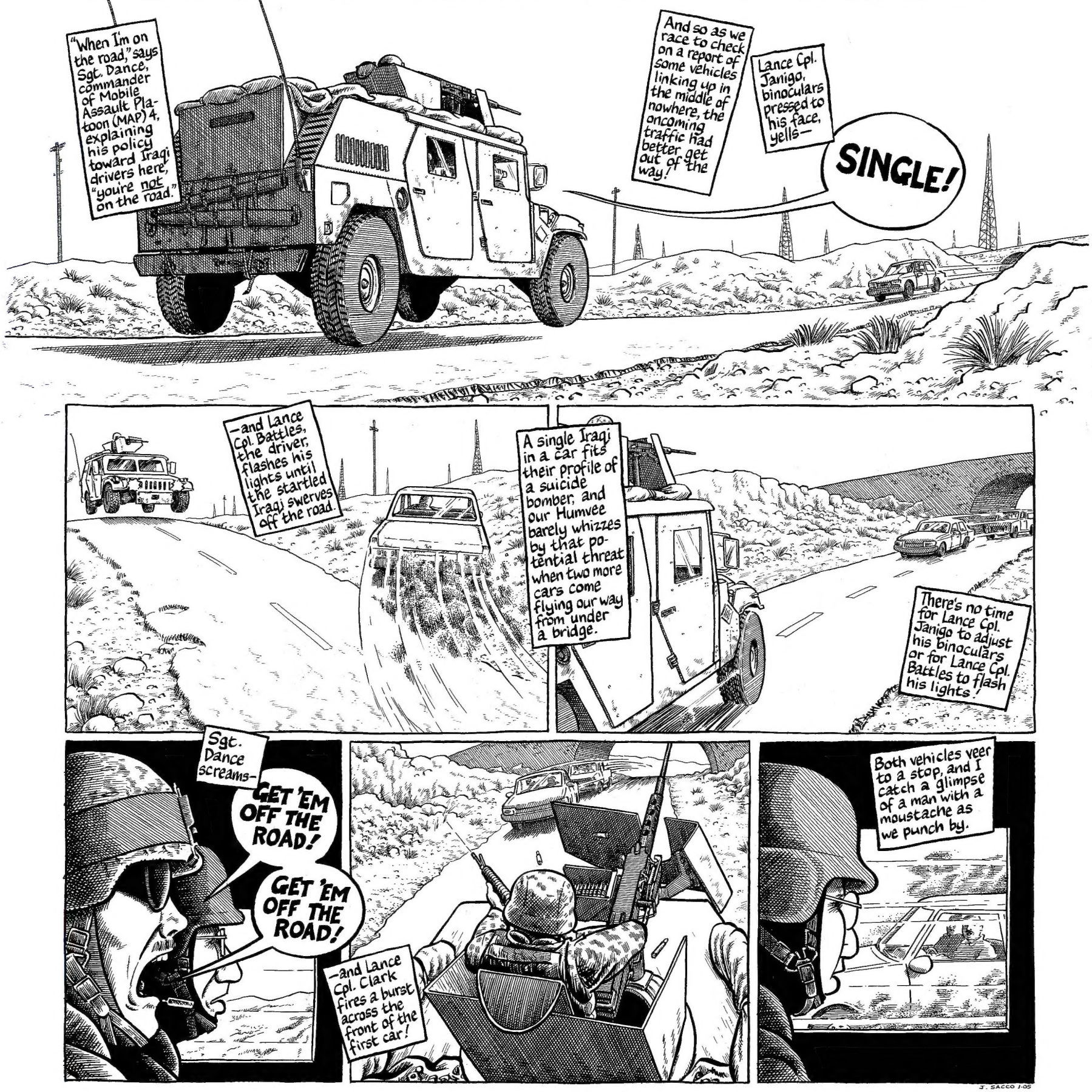
GW0226016 2/21/05 11:42 PM Page 16

Guardian Weekend spooler 246x292mm trim size

Joe Sacco, famed comic book writer, went on a mission to Iraq for Weekend. This is his story

COMPLACENCY KILLS

by Joe Sacco ©2005



Tel 0207 206 1000 www.feburman.com

CYAN MAGENTA YELLOW BLACK

E. Burman Limited Communicating in Colour

PDF/X overprint

GW0226017 2/18/05 3:30 AM Page 17

Guardian Weekend spooler 246x292mm trim size

Tel 0207 206 1000 www.feburman.com

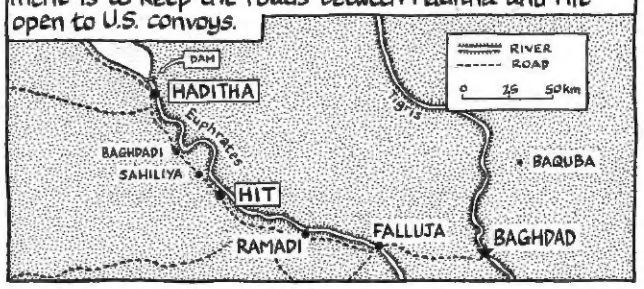
A few minutes later we reach the suspicious group of cars, which turns out to be a funeral procession.

"The bad guys don't usually congregate in vehicles on the side of the road," says Sgt. Dance, who was skeptical all along. "It's painfully obvious."

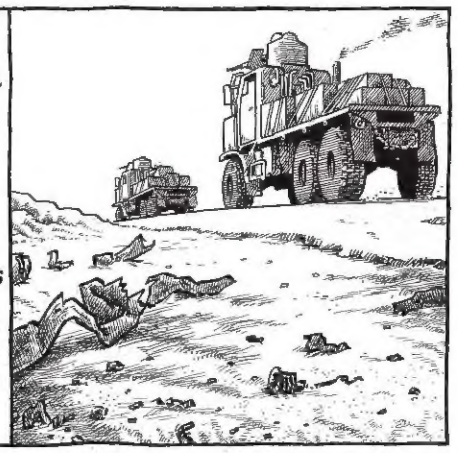
And to the bereaved he adds—

OUR SYMPATHIES ARE WITH YOU.

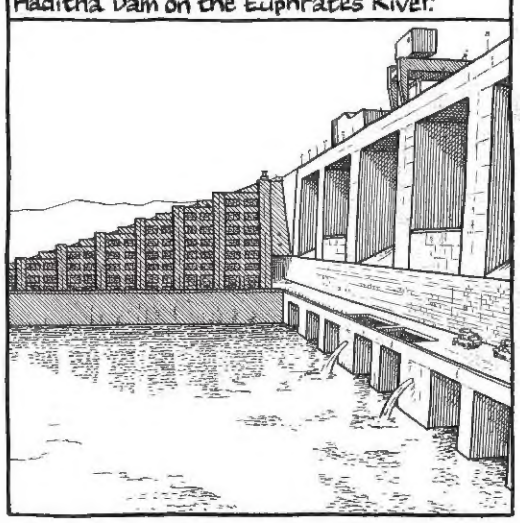
The primary mission of Sgt. Dance and the MAPs of the Weapons Company of the 1st Battalion, 23rd Marine Regiment is to keep the roads between Haditha and Hit open to U.S. convoys.



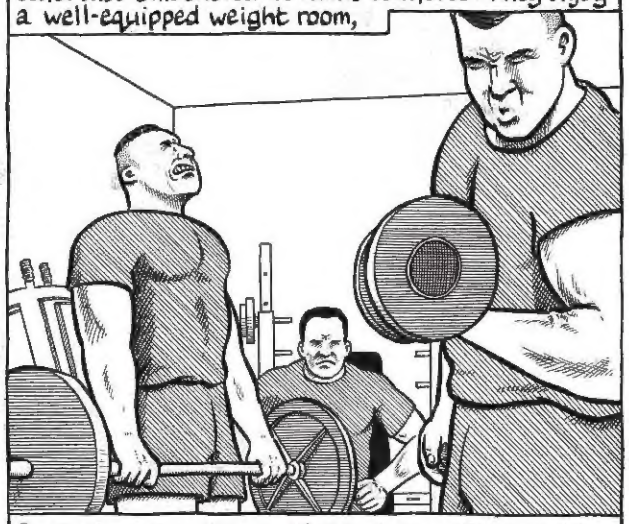
Their adversaries are insurgents whose chief weapons are roadside and vehicle-borne bombs and land mines. Twisted bits of car metal, charred patches of ground, and craters attest to the violence they've dished out to the Americans.



The Marines of the 1/23, who are nearly all Texan reservists, run most of their road patrols in this stretch of western Iraq from the functioning ten-story high Haditha Dam on the Euphrates River.

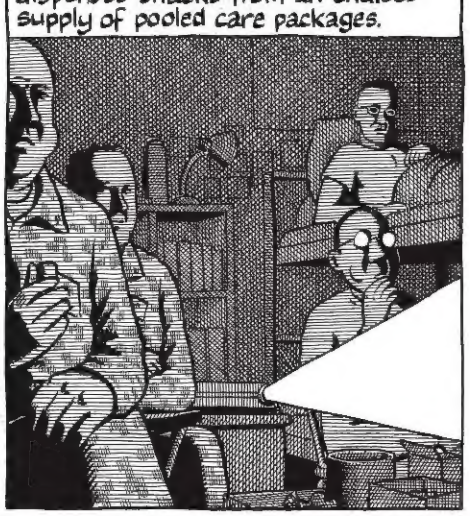


The stairwells reek of sulfur, but the Marines are otherwise smothered in home comforts: They enjoy a well-equipped weight room,

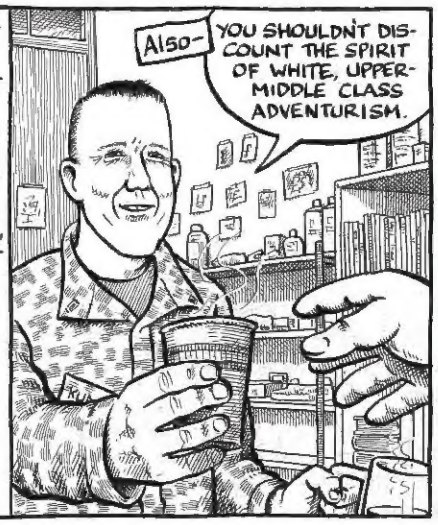


football on the chow hall's big-screen TV, and 24-hour internet connections to their wives and mothers.

I'm bunking on the fifth deck in a room full of officers where Lt. Crabtree, the battalion adjutant, projects a movie on the wall every night and dispenses snacks from an endless supply of pooled care packages.



The room's coffee aficionado is the commander of the engineering platoon, Capt. Kuniholm, and once I ask what motivated a married, liberal, business-owning Ph.D. student like himself to join the reserves knowing full well he would be sent to Iraq. A sense of duty, he answers.



Almost discordantly in this cocooned world of X-Boxes and Maxim magazines, a sign on the second deck reminds the Marines of the MAPs heading down to their Humvees that—

J. SACCO 1.05

T. E. Burman Limited Communicating in Colour CYAN MAGENTA YELLOW BLACK

PDF/X overprint

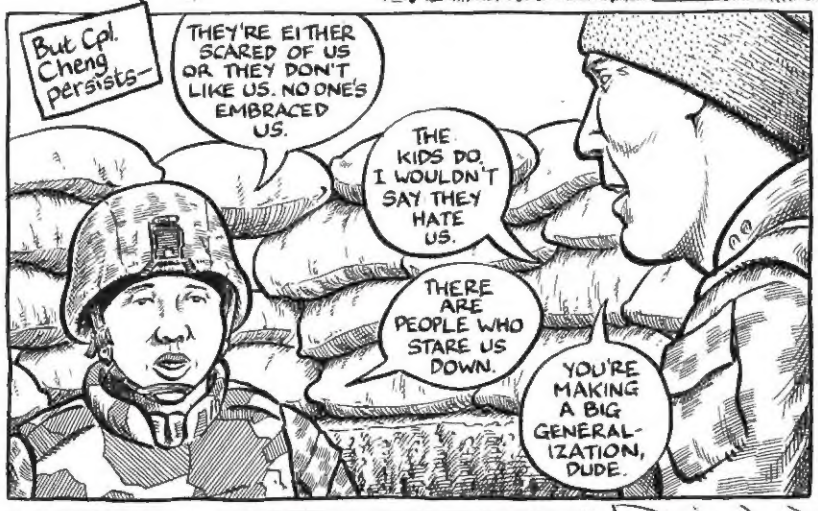
GW0226018 2/19/05 11:11 AM Page 18

Guardian Weekend spooler 246x292mm trim size

Tel 0207 206 1000 www.feburman.com

CYAN MAGENTA YELLOW BLACK

E. Burman Limited Communicating in Colour



PDF/X overprint

GW0226019 2/19/05 11:12 AM Page 19

Guardian Weekend spooler 246x292mm trim size

Tel 0207 206 1000 www.feburman.com

J. E. Burman Limited Communicating in Colour CYAN MAGENTA YELLOW BLACK

PDF/X overprint

GW0226020 2/18/05 3:31 AM Page 20

Guardian Weekend spooler 246x292mm trim size

Tel 0207 206 1000 www.feburman.com

C. E. Burman Limited Communicating in Colour CYAN MAGENTA YELLOW BLACK

PDF/X overprint

GW0226021 2/18/05 3:31 AM Page 21

Guardian Weekend spooler 246x292mm trim size

Tel 0207 206 1000 www.feburman.com

MAP 2 returns to the desert to complete its watch. As night falls, Sgt. Cantu's crew is tensed up, and soon there is word of a car stopped nearby.

We can see it from here even without special optics.

Its lights are turned off!

Now they're turned on!

What the hell is that about?

Then...

I'VE GOT AN INDIVIDUAL OUT ON THE PASSENGER SIDE!

Doing what?!!

We bounce and rattle overland, and then join the road.

Our headlights are off—typical for Marines driving with night-vision scopes.

Meanwhile...

Iraqi vehicles are coming our way!

They're not stopping!

They're not even slowing down!

Lance Cpl. Ledesma and Cpl. Munoz wave their flashlights to the side of the road.

There's no time to pop a warning flare!

The Iraqi drivers probably have no clue what the waving flashlights mean.

In fact, the Iraqis may have no idea that the people waving the flashlights are jittery, well armed Marines.

The Iraqi drivers fly by us—

—and luckily for them the Marines duck behind the high-back's armored side rather than open fire—

SHIT, I HATE THAT!

—because in the Land of the Car Bomb, who'd have blamed a Marine for shooting up an onrushing vehicle?

—even one whose occupants merely failed to solve the riddle of flashlights waving in the dark.

J. GACCO 1-05

When Marines shoot innocent Iraqis, the battalion offers "salacia payments" of up to $2,500 to the victim or the victim's family to express "sympathy, not liability," according to Major Coakley, the unit's Staff Judge Advocate. In its five months in Iraq, the battalion has made "no more than ten" such payments for civilian deaths, mostly involving people in cars who inadvertently ran Marine roadblocks.

J. E. Burman Limited Communicating in Colour CYAN MAGENTA YELLOW BLACK

PDF/X overprint

GW0226023 2/18/05 3:31 AM Page 23

Guardian Weekend spooler 246x292mm trim size

Tel 0207 206 1000 www.feburman.com

J. E. Burman Limited Communicating in Colour CYAN MAGENTA YELLOW BLACK

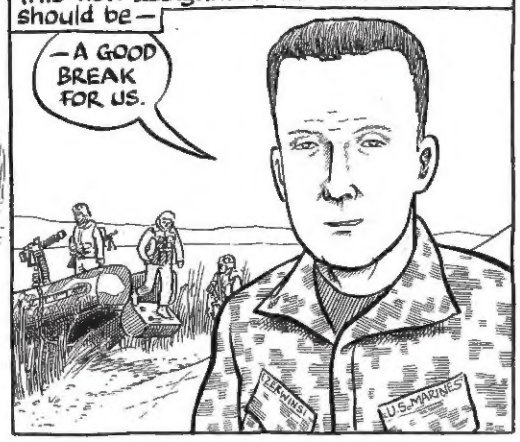
PDF/X overprint

GW0226024 2/18/05 3:31 AM Page 24

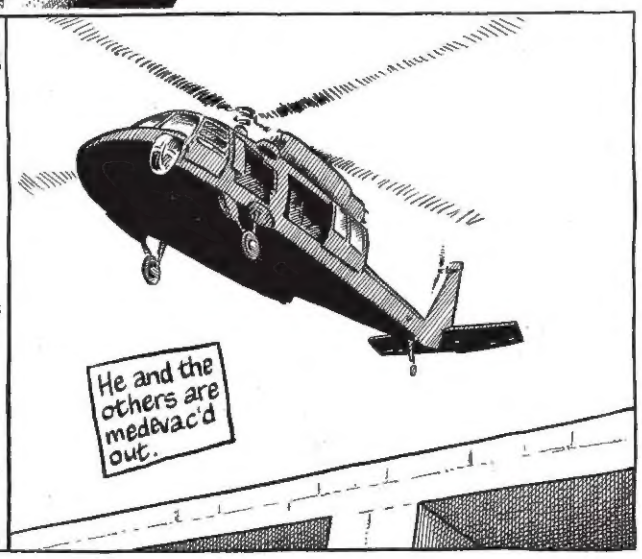
Guardian Weekend spooler 246x292mm trim size

Tel 0207 206 1000 www.feburman.com

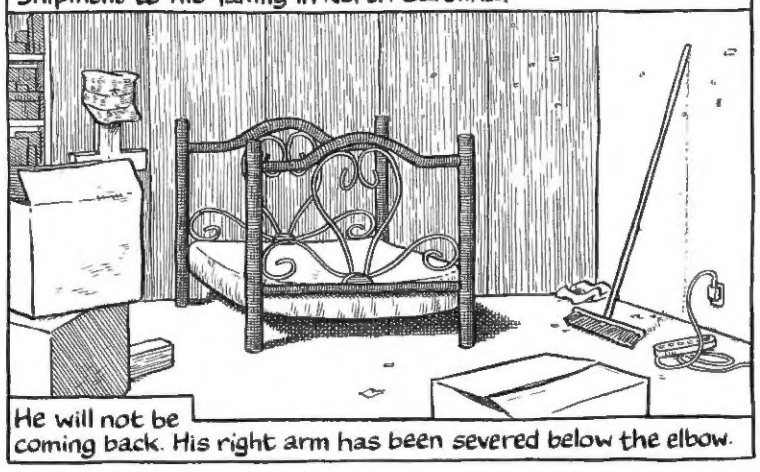
Afterwards, section leader Sgt. Czerwinski tells me that the river company has just come off months of hard patrolling and fighting in the Falluja and Ramadi areas. This new assignment at Haditha Dam should be—



The next day, his unit is ambushed after landing on the river bank to investigate some small arms fire. Lance Cpl. Parrello, who piloted the boat I'd ridden on the day before, is killed. Three others are wounded, including Capt. Kuniholm, my coffee-drinking roommate at the dam, who had jumped on one of the boats on the spur of the moment.

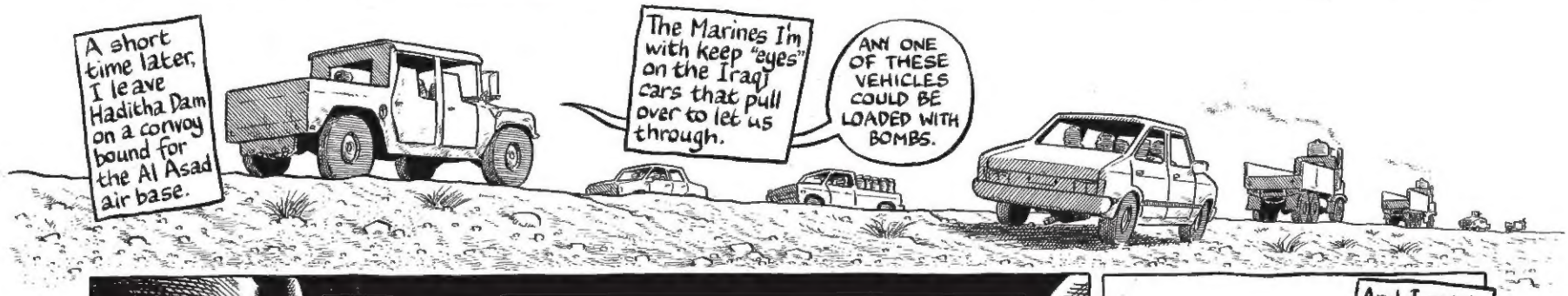


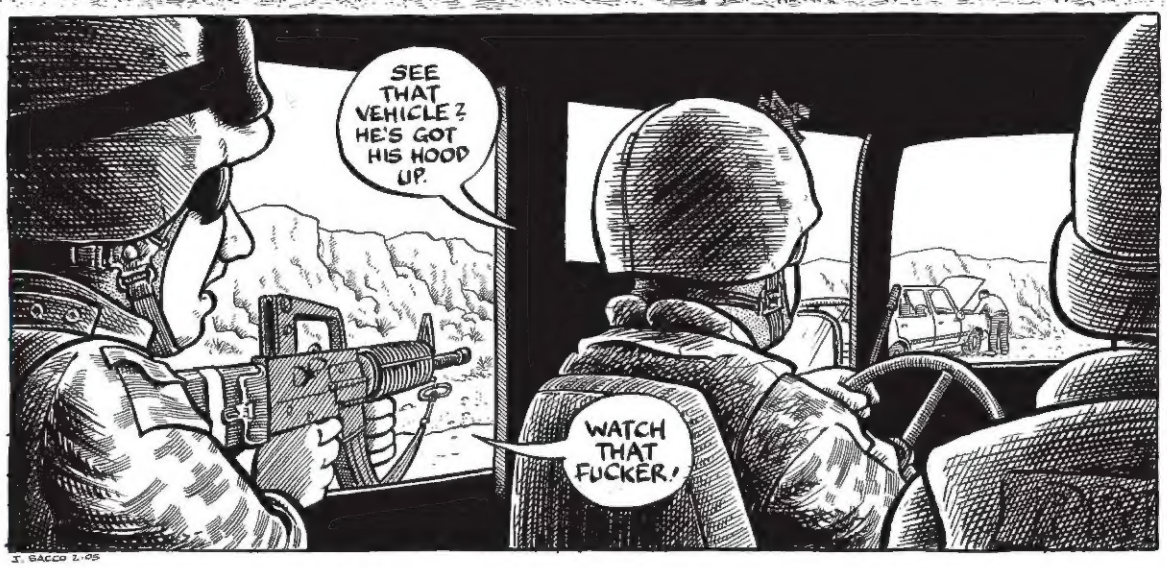
Within hours, Capt. Kuniholm's 21 pairs of black socks, his four year old's drawings, and all his other items are packed up for shipment to his family in North Carolina.

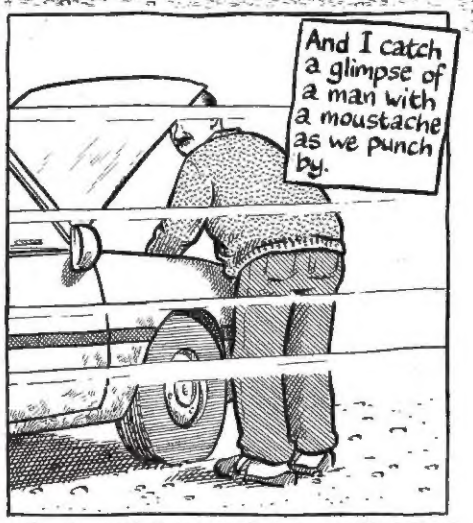


He will not be coming back. His right arm has been severed below the elbow.

A short time later, I leave Haditha Dam on a convoy bound for the Al Asad air base.







WITHIN A MONTH OF MY LEAVING, THE MARINES OF 1/23 AND THEIR ATTACHED UNITS SUFFERED SEVEN MORE FATALITIES.

E. Burman Limited Communicating in Colour
CYAN MAGENTA YELLOW BLACK
PDF/X overprint